

Back Again, Back Again: Swords and Magic

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode two: Swords and Magic.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: The woman's face lost its' color. I froze, waiting to see what she would do. *If she starts towards me, I'll run.* I thought, planning out my escape into the great unknown. *I'll hide in the woods, I'll take the fork left. I won't get arrested for... clothes theft?* Because at the time, that was what I was worried about. I hadn't known why she would go pale from... me, instead of shouting, instead of reacting with anger. Whatever I know now, at the time I thought it was because a muddy girl was standing in her yard and stealing her dresses.

But she didn't drive me away. Instead, she started towards me, slowly, arms outstretched and fingers splayed like I was a stray cat she was trying to coax inside. The woman murmured something under her breath -- in a language I couldn't understand, but it was calm. It was meant to soothe me, I could tell. Her dark hair began to plaster to her face in the rain, but she continued to move towards me with slow, deliberate steps.

She reached me, still murmuring something I couldn't pick apart. I froze, deer-in-headlights, waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something to snap. One hand still clutched the clothesline dress.

The woman peeled her jacket from her shoulders. Every action was slow, deliberate, like she realized how close I was to booking it, this feral thing in her yard. She draped the jacket around my shoulders and smiled softly, her eyes crinkling. The woman smelled like jasmine and pine. The world seemed softer as she put her hand on my shoulder.

I didn't know what she was saying, but the meaning was clear. *The weather is too poor to be out in the rain. Come inside. It's okay.*

So I let her lead me inside, this woman soft and motherly amid the pouring rain and yelling people and unfamiliarity. She pulled down a pair of trousers from the line, wet through but so was I, and handed them to me. I clutched them to my chest as she brought me through the doorway -- her hand stayed on the small of my back until she sat me down in her kitchen and plunked a bowl of -- porridge -- or something of the sort in front of me. The bowl was a red-brown like the not-right trees outside. It looked hand-carved.

I was hesitantly beginning to eat when a man climbed down the ladder from the loft, holding one baby tight to his chest and helping two others, older, down after him. He, too, stopped dead when he saw me, and as the younger girls rushed along to the table, setting the baby into her seat and taking their own as their mother plunked porridge in front of them, the man called to his wife, his tone the sort you use when you see a copperhead on the path in front of you. They spoke in a tongue I didn't recognize, his tone hard and hers somewhere between plying and nonchalant, still as gentle as the one she used to bring me inside. The message was clear: *don't scare her*.

He moved to the table and scooped up the baby, bouncing her on his hip as he fed her with his free hand. The man shot me a

look, piercing and full. *I know what you bring*, his eyes said, but he broke our stare before I lost my nerve and looked away.

The two little girls peered at me over their own bowls of oatmeal as their mother breezily sat glasses of milk in front of each of them. She smacked the back of the eldest's head, and snapped something that made her glance away. Again, the message was clear: *It's rude to stare*.

It's fine, I finally said, in English, the default I reverted to. *She's okay*.

The man and woman exchanged another look -- darker this time. They didn't respond, but it confirmed... something with them. He nodded. The woman fiddled with her spoon.

The man said something more hurriedly -- a confirmation -- and after a tense nod from the woman, sent the children back upstairs as they finished eating before disappearing out the front door, throwing a cloak over his shoulders and storming out into the rain.

What? I said as the man left. *I'm sorry to have intruded -- Should I leave?*

She sighed and slid into the chair opposite me. Before I could flinch she grabbed my hands, pulling them into her own.

She stared into my eyes as she spoke, prying, suppliant. It was an apology, a last-chance.

I stared blankly back.

She sighed once more and left me to finish my porridge.

I was scraping the bottom of the bowl when the door was knocked open, slamming against the wall behind it with a crack like the thunder outside. Soldiers -- that was the only way they could be described -- *soldiers*, like medieval knights -- came storming in. The woman backed up against the kitchen counter, pressing herself as far away from them as possible and pulling her hands up in a defense as they began to shout. The one in the lead barked something to her, and she pointed at me.

Her eyes held an apology. I jumped to my feet.

They were pulling back my arms and shoving me down before I could run -- or fight -- or -- anything. I'm not sure what my response would've been beyond *panic*.

Because *panic* had set in, sure and certain. Panic was real and full and I was yelling at the guards, telling them to let me go, that I didn't know what they were saying or what I'd done wrong. The woman had given me the coat. I hadn't stolen anything.

The woman stood pale-faced. I cast around and looked to her desperately -- *why?* -- but she didn't move her planted feet. Instead, she hesitated for half a second before making a gesture -- fingers curled into a fist with the thumb pressed straight against it -- and dragged that fist from shoulder to shoulder, then out towards me, two fingers crossed like a broken promise.

The gesture turns out to mean a lot of things. It can be a blessing for travel. An apology. And it's a sign of respect, for a lot of people. I don't know which one she was using it for. I didn't know any of the meanings, then.

I cursed at her. Not that she knew what I was saying. Not that I had known what she was saying.

The soldiers pulled me outside and shoved me to my knees. It was still raining outside, just as violently as before -- mud seeped through the trousers the woman gave me and turned my knees to ice. They bound my hands behind me with coarse rope and pulled a cloth over my eyes, and as I strained my ears, blind, my words useless and my mind nearly overwhelmed, I made out two words from the entropy around me. *Vatakina eligida*. I held on to them, because they sounded right. Because the lead soldier -- he's important, but not yet -- said it with such force that it had to be powerful.

They are. The words, I mean. *Vatakina eligida*. It means *chosen child*. *Prophecy child*.

They were talking about me.

But I didn't know that yet.

All my will to run left me the second I stopped being able to see. I could still feel the soldiers around me, but the idea of stumbling through the village off-kilter and blind and falling into another ditch -- or breaking something -- or being shot in the back as I tried to run was enough to rocket my anxiety up to an eleven. So I stayed, on my knees in the rain in the yard of the woman who fed me, trying to figure out what was going on, breathing hard, chest tight. Lost in noise I couldn't pick apart, lost without lips to read and written words to assign to the sounds I heard. Lost in a language I didn't understand.

A horse whinnied, fearful.

A soldier pulled me to my feet and shoved -- two-handed, solid and intentional. I stumbled forward, blind, and hit -- a horse. Wet and warm and alive.

Somehow I ended up on top of it, balanced precariously in the saddle, as a soldier climbed on behind me. I was struggling

not to lose my balance when the soldier grabbed the reins and kicked the horse, and I slammed back into his chest.

Let me tell you, it's a distinctly uncomfortable feeling to ride a horse blind and with your hands tied behind you. You're pin-balled between the soldier's arms that're circling you and, due the fact that you're trying really hard not to fall off -- thus, you're in rather -- uh -- close proximity to your captor -- you can feel soldier-boy's crotch pressing into your back. You're trying not to think about it. You're kind of wanting to fall off the horse because you don't know if it's your imagination or it's getting harder.

I had more than convinced myself I was awake by this point -- I couldn't dream soldier dick this vividly -- but counting seconds wasn't working like it should've. I kept losing track.

The rain faded to a drizzle, then became nothing but curling humidity, steam rising from the dirt. My blindfold was pulled off, a chunk of my hair with it, a side-effect of curls and rain.

A palace unfolded around me, archways and stonework and more people than I could count, all rushing to help the battalion down and into the courtyard. I was pulled off the

horse and soldiers surrounded me as I stumbled, all still in their helmets -- faceless and more unsettling for it.

With the ability to see once more came the urge to run, adrenaline and fear creating something potent in my chest.

But there were a lot of people, and most of them were armed. Not guns -- swords and daggers. Some had quivers slung over their backs. A few of the soldiers had what looked to be crossbows. I didn't want to get stabbed or otherwise impaled, so as the lead soldier dismounted from his horse and began to stride through the halls, I marched along with the rest of them.

It was gorgeous. God, everything a castle should be. Grand and old, made of statues and parapets and stained glass and rooflines that looked meant for climbing.

We halted -- *halted*, like soldiers, instead of just merely stopping -- outside of a set of double-doors, elaborate and gleaming, inlaid with gold and carved with a crest of crossed swords and a lion's face.

The people that dogged the soldier's steps as they marched drifted back, and the lead soldier -- the one that called me *eligida* -- knocked.

The doors swung open with a near-silent *whoosh* borne from oil and solid, heavy wood.

It was a throne room -- even more opulent than the doors outside. Everything was golden and glittering, or made of glossy wood tinted red-gold by huge stained-glass windows. Courtiers in elaborate clothing -- dresses and brocade shirts, silk and embroidery and fabric painted so intricately it must've taken weeks -- lined the walls like artwork themselves. They twittered as the lead soldier gave me a half-push forward, made a sweeping motion that clearly meant *after you*. Or, maybe, just *walk*.

Listener, you're never more aware of how disastrous and half-drowned you must look until you're on display in a room of royalty. Royalty -- because who else could these people be? It was a damn castle. The lead soldier, a step or two behind me, began to shadow my shaky walk down the aisle.

I wrapped the woman's coat closer around myself and tried not to look frightened.

Far down at the very end of the hall a king and queen sat on gilded thrones. The king's crown was crooked, the queen's lips pressed together in a way that broadcasted her distaste. The stares of the court carried their own weight, but the king and queen -- both dressed in dark blues and golden highlights, the queen with tightly coiled hair pulled up and away from her brown face, countenance the definition of museum-perfect, and

the king, eyes watery-pale that moved around like a man running calculations -- they were something else entirely. The king was some shade of pale, I would have guessed, but currently red as a lobster, sunburnt to the core. He waved away the man at the foot of their thrones, who was bowing and scraping in a plea for -- something. He was gone by the time I was close enough to take his place.

I stopped near ten feet back from the foot of the three stairs that led to their thrones, cowed by the guards halted behind me.

The lead soldier was still at my back. He did not let me retreat further. Before I could get a word out or have the sense to avert my eyes instead of staring openly like a fool at the kings of this castle, my knees buckled as the soldier swept them out from under me. I slammed to the floor, forced into a kneel, as pain radiated up my legs when they made contact with the stone floor.

Dead silence. And then --

Who is this? The king said -- in English.

English. In this land of anything but. Gods, I was so shocked that the throbbing in my knees subsided for just a

moment. After an afternoon of not knowing a word, this was -- beyond strange.

The lead guard stepped out from behind me, and I flicked my eyes up just enough to watch as he took off his helmet, shaking out his curly dark hair. He was the spitting image of the couple on the thrones before me -- umber-skinned, dark haired, like the woman on the throne. Tall and sharp, like the man. He was a prince. Their son.

The girl that changes everything, he said, also in English. *Dressed in gold. Hair of fire. Magic in her veins.*

This was met with expressions of shock from the kings on the thrones, but the court did not react the same way -- just kept staring, waiting, leaning into the stillness. The English had escaped them. I took just a moment to be pissed that this boy rode beside me for hours and never let on that he knew what I was saying the whole goddamned way before the pale king spoke again.

Prove her, he said, and the prince hauled me to my feet and pulled open my coat to reveal my shitty golden hobbit shirt.

The reaction, this time, was palpable throughout the entirety of the court. There was crescendoing noise and the

prince-boy took a step up behind me -- as if in protection -- as they clamoured for a closer look.

I was infinitely grateful to have been wearing pants, at this point.

One word started to filter through the din: *Enarbol*. It took up among the people like a chant, becoming greater and greater -- *enarbol. Enarbol. Enarbol*, until the queen stood, and with a lift of her hand, brought everything back to silence -- this silence weighted down with anticipation.

In the other-language she spoke, her voice ringing through the hall with far more authority than the man stood beside her. The boy-prince translated for me, low and close to my ear. I didn't know if it was better that way -- my knees still smarted, telling me he was not to be trusted. They bruised by morning.

But it was help, and it was understanding, something I needed desperately in this world.

We will take her to it, he translated, *and we will let Them decide.*

Enarbol means *great tree*. Or -- *last tree*, depending on how you translate. Both are, objectively, true. I still hadn't known that, at the time. I thought it was a person.

At the ushering of the queen, the court swarmed out through the lion-gold doors. I was pulled along, the prince-boy behind me and miles of silk brocade ahead of me, chatter all around in language unintelligible to my foreign ears. I worried, for a minute, that this was some kind of execution we were headed to -- because it seemed appropriately medieval, but the excitement wasn't underlaced with death. It was -- hope, that ran underneath it all.

An odd feeling.

Back through the echoing corridors, back along the almost-indoor castle archways, back past the eyes of the watching servants. They gaped beneath their averted glances, and added onto the herd moving out as they caught sight of the kings and -- me.

They stopped in a clearing, bottled up ahead of where the prince and I lagged towards the back of the group. He had one hand on my arm, having been sort-of-pulling sort-of-guiding me along, and as they all turned, in a -- wave -- to look to me, he let go.

I swallowed and tried not to cower.

And -- they parted, the court did, and at the prompting of the prince, low and soft in English -- his mouth barely moving

-- I walked, shakily, towards the giant tree they'd revealed at the center.

Twisted and spiraling up towards the sky, leaves thick with green and the veins through the leaves almost seeming to run -- gold -- I stopped at the base of it. My head tilted back -- so far I almost fell back over -- as I stared up into the canopy.

It was ancient -- that was easy enough to tell. It's -- hard to quantify, exactly, how *There* a tree becomes after this long of life. There, capital T, emphasised. There, as in -- *sentient* seems wrong. *Alive* isn't extraordinary. It -- had a presence, like nothing you see in pine forests and spindly beech reaching up for the sky before they're ready.

Do you know the redwood forests, in Washington? The trees are giant, yes, but friendly rather than imposing. They welcome people to walk among them. They're ancient and have seen more than you could ever know, but they're kinder for it. The air around them is so -- still, too. It's Cakeswater, but without any threat of night terror. It's stillness and welcoming, in that gentle, homely sort of way. Peaceful. It's -- *There*-ness. Capital T.

It was all of that, and more. The world hummed -- not externally, no resonation in the air, but it was as if something

had activated in my blood and the world shifted into clearer focus.

I found myself at the base of the tree. It called to me still, that gentle slow murmuring of sunlight. And, half still caught up in the presence of it all, I reached out and brushed my hand along the trunk.

The Enarbol was ridged with age, resistant to change all around it. Smooth, if you ran your fingertips over it the right direction. And where I expected my hand to stop there, the gentle calling of my blood with this creature greater than myself -- it pulled me in: in my hand went, in a halting, yanking, sort of way, and then -- light encapsulated my vision. The summer sun at eight-fifteen: that perfect golden glow that catches your eyes and turns everything to fire.

It felt like I was on fire. I think I screamed, but no one touched me -- or, if they did, my nerve endings were too alight for it to make any sort of difference.

My other hand found the tree, and it did not sink in. I stumbled backwards, my palm within the tree closed around something and I didn't even realize it until the light faded from my vision into a soft greenness that clouded the periphery of my sight.

A sword. Like Arthurian legend, like this was Caliburn pulled from stone.

My blood sang. The sword began to glow, green-gold running along the fuller until the whole thing was alight.

I raised my sword, dizzy with the magic in my veins.

Vatakina eligida, I heard, somewhere behind me. As if I were listening to the radio from another room.

Prophecy Child.

The light swelled, green-gold glow filling my vision once more, and I fell to the grass.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role that no one else can fill but you. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.